

THE HUNDREDTH NIGHT

By E. Phillips Oppenheim

THE woman sat alone in her dressing-room. For the second act, her costume needed no change—a dash of powder, a trifling rearrangement of the hair, had completed in a few seconds her necessary preparations. She had dismissed her maid, and denied herself to a lady journalist who represented a fashion paper, and wanted to talk about her dresses. She felt the need of solitude.

The girl with the large dark eyes—who was she? Had she been looking into a mirror, back down the long avenue of years to the days of her own girlhood, when she, too, had gazed out upon life with something of the same mysterious wonder? Fashions move always in a circle. She, too, had twisted her hair somewhat in that fashion, had worn a rose instead of a ribbon, had sought with something of the same almost plaintive eagerness to understand, if only dimly, the life which throbbed on every side of her. Who was she? A ghost? An actual unit of the audience, a living and breathing person, or a creature of the fancy only? The violins of the orchestra swayed less and less, the music died away. There was silence, and then the tinkling of a little bell. The curtain had risen.

In a few minutes, she was on the stage again, face to face with a situation round which, even in these days of the play's assured success, controversy raged fiercely. A false note, and daring became grossness; a gesture, even a look, and the forbidden was manifest. To conceal it utterly was the most exquisite triumph of art. That night, perhaps for the first time

in her life, the woman wholly succeeded.

Again the curtain fell amidst a storm of applause, and again the woman sat abstracted and thoughtful in her dressing-room. This time she was not left undisturbed. A man came in to her, tall, graceful, but with the tired face and wrinkled brows of premature age. She took no notice of his entrance. He paused to light a cigarette.

"I congratulate you," he remarked, drily.

"Upon what?"

"Your versatility. You have given a new rendering of *Mona* to-night. You have stripped her of the flesh, lifted her wholly off the clogging earth. But I warn you, Emily, the critics won't like it."

"The critics!"

"People are so like sheep. They need some one to direct them. They do not see the ass's skin, only the mantle of the prophet. And our friends of the press do not like to be trifled with."

The woman sat still, with her back to him. The perfume of his cigarette, his presence in her room, the easy nonchalance of his manner, stung her. She still looked into the mirror, and still she saw the same things.

"I must play the part," she said, in a low tone, "as I feel it."

"Is not that," he remarked, holding his cigarette thoughtfully between his fingers, "a little hard upon those who have to play up to you? Last night you were flesh and blood, the arrogant courtesan, a marvelous creation. You almost frightened me with the reality of it, and one could hear the audience holding their breaths—it was supreme.

To-night you rise phoenix-like to a virtue which holds evil things abashed. If you are the actual courtesan, you are also the embodiment of all the opposite things in life. It may be a triumph in originality—your rendering, I mean—but it is deuced uncomfortable for me."

The woman smiled, faintly. She understood quite well the reason of his annoyance. He was the puppet-actor, born of the times, only possible in this period of uninspired plays, a man of graceful presence and musical voice, who owed his position to these things, and these things only. The genius that made it possible for her suddenly to purify a situation which it was rumored had worried the King's censor, had fired no answering impulse in his slower wits. His acting had been constrained and unimpressive. He had felt himself at sea, and he had shown it. Man-like, he was aggrieved. He had been robbed of his meed of applause, the only stimulant not wholly physical which appealed to him. This was the hundredth night, too, and the critics were in the stalls.

"I am glad that you felt the change," the woman said, slowly. "Why not adapt yourself to it?"

"Why change?" he answered, irritably. "The piece went well enough before. You seem to be trying to transform a magnificent piece of realism into an idyll. At this theatre, we do not play to school-children."

She abandoned the subject a little abruptly. It did not interest her to discuss these things with him.

"I wonder," she said, "if you know who some people are, in the third row of the stalls—two elderly ladies, rather oddly dressed, and a child with large eyes."

He prided himself upon knowing everybody, and he did not fail her.

"Two old maids from the wilds of Scotland, and their niece," he answered. "Nugent Campbell, their name is, I think—the girl's father is the Sir Henry Nugent Campbell who did so well out at the war. Beautiful eyes, hasn't she?"

He was examining himself negligently in the mirror; the fold of his tie did not altogether please him, or was it his pin that was a trifle crooked? Presently, however, he glanced toward her. She was sitting quite still, and her hands were clasping the arms of the chair. The natural pallor of her complexion seemed intensified. There were things in her face which he did not understand.

"You're seedy, Emily," he exclaimed. "Let me ring for your woman. Have some wine, will you?"

She moved her head toward the door.

"Go away!" she said.

"Nonsense! I can't leave you like this. The curtain will be up in five minutes. Let me get you a glass of champagne."

"Cannot you see that I wish to be alone?" she said. "I am quite well. Please go away."

He shrugged his shoulders and departed, closing the door behind him. From outside came a momentary wave of strangely mingled sounds, the shifting of heavy scenery, the murmur of conversation from the audience, of muffled laughter from the wings, the throbbing of violins from the orchestra. Then the door closed, and there was silence. The woman rose swiftly, and turned the key in the lock.

The duke stopped his sisters on their way out. He addressed them with a severity which was belied by the twinkle in his eyes.

"Amelia!" he exclaimed. "I am astonished. Fancy bringing the child to see a play like this!"

Amelia, who had had qualms, looked at him, anxiously.

"I am very sorry, Robert, but I had no one to consult, and they assured me at the library that it was quite the thing to see. If you had kept your promise and come in to tea yesterday afternoon, I had a list of plays which I had intended to submit to you."

"You mustn't scold aunt," the girl declared, smiling up at him. "I have never enjoyed anything so much in

my life. If only it were not so sad!"

"You were lucky to-night, anyhow," he remarked. "I have never seen Emily Royce act like that before."

"She is beautiful," the girl murmured. "How I should love to see her off the stage!"

The duke hesitated, and then laughed to himself.

"You shall," he said. "I'm going behind. Hundredth-night celebration, you know, and I'll take you if you like."

The girl's eyes were bright with joy.

"Auntie, do you hear?" she exclaimed. "Isn't it glorious? Do you mean that I shall really see her to speak to?"

"Robert! You are joking, of course," Miss Amelia exclaimed. "You do not seriously propose to take that child behind the scenes?"

He smiled. "Why not? I'll take all of you. Huntingdon will be delighted, and it's quite the thing to do, I assure you. Your friend, Lady Martin, and her daughters have gone."

Miss Amelia sighed. "I am sorry to disappoint Esther," she said, "and I do not dispute what you say, Robert, but I cannot part with all my old prejudices so easily. I do not approve of the theatre. I will not sacrifice my principles to the extent of accepting hospitality from the ladies and gentlemen who have been kind enough to amuse us."

The duke nodded his head approvingly. He thoroughly enjoyed his sisters.

"Quite right," he remarked, "quite right. Never mind, Esther," he added, seeing her gallant effort to hide her disappointment, "I'll take you. You'll find my carriage outside, Amelia. Take it home, and send it back to the stage door for us. I'll look after Esther."

"You dear!" the child exclaimed, clinging to his arm. "You don't mind, Aunt Amelia?"

Miss Amelia sighed. "Your uncle

would not suggest anything unbecomingly, my dear," she said. "Our approval is, of course, quite another matter."

So, presently, Esther found herself in the strangest place she had ever imagined in her life. She was on the stage, shut off now from the house by the drop-curtain, and thronged with crowds of men and women in evening dress. Servants in livery were handing round champagne and sandwiches; all present seemed to be talking a great deal, and enjoying themselves immensely. Leverson caught sight of the new-comers presently, and came hurrying up.

"A little niece of mine from the wilds of Scotland, Leverson," the duke remarked. "Stage-struck, of course. I've brought her to see what ordinary people you all are with your war-paint off. Mr. Arthur Leverson, Miss Nugent Campbell."

The child was shy at first, but Leverson laid himself out to amuse her, and it was very easy. He showed her how the lime-light was worked, and explained the moving of the scenery. They were standing a little apart, talking, when Emily Royce came in.

"Oh, I wonder—!" the girl exclaimed, eagerly.

He looked down at her with an amused smile.

"Well?"

"Could I—would she speak to me just for a moment?"

He was a little annoyed, but he hid it admirably.

"Of course. I'll take you to her."

Emily spared him the effort. She detached herself from a little group, and came toward them. Leverson murmured the girl's name.

"I saw you in front, didn't I?" Emily said, smiling. "Somehow, I fancied that the theatre was almost a new place to you. Was I right?"

"Absolutely," the child answered. She was no longer in the least shy. No one had ever looked at her quite so kindly as this wonderful woman.

"I have never been inside the theatre before," Esther admitted. "My aunts

are—a little old-fashioned, and we live so far off from everywhere."

"Go and talk to the Esholts, Mr. Leverson," Emily said. "I am going to take possession of Miss Campbell for a little time."

Leverson withdrew with a subdued grumble meant to sound good-natured, but not altogether successful. Emily made the girl sit down on a lounge by her side.

"I noticed you quite at the beginning of the play," she said, smiling. "You seemed so absorbed, and you know we people on the stage love to act to people who are interested."

"I think it is marvelous," the child said, still a little shyly, "to think that any one can act like you do. I can scarcely believe that I am really here talking to you."

"Tell me about your home in Scotland, and your life there," Emily said. "Do you mind? I should so like to hear about it all."

The child was ready enough to talk. She spoke of the old, gray castle, with its prim, well-ordered life; the wonderful hills, with the mystery of their inaccessible, mist-wreathed summits; the deep, tree-hung glens; the salmon river which came rushing down from some hidden spot; the purple moors always so lonely, and growing bleaker and bleaker as they rolled away northward. The woman by her side smiled and listened and prompted her every now and then with some questions. Behind it all was the strange background of gay conversation, the popping of corks, the ceaseless hurrying hither and thither of servants.

"You have very few friends, then?"

"Very few. My aunts are not fond of strangers or visitors. Sometimes it is very dull, especially when the rains come, and the whole country is hidden in mists."

"But your father—is he never with you?"

The girl shook her head, gravely.

"Very, very seldom. He is a soldier, you know, and he is always away fighting somewhere. I think that he does not like being at home."

The girl's eyes, very grave and steadfast, were suddenly troubled. Something in the set immobility of Emily's features chilled her.

"I am afraid," she said, "that I am wearying you. I do not know why I have talked so much of my little concerns, when I would so much rather have had you tell me about your own wonderful life."

Emily shook her head. The faint smile which parted her lips was at least reassuring.

"You do not know how interested I have been," she said. "Some day, I hope that we shall have another talk."

"We are in London for two months," Esther said. "Might I come and see you?"

"I think—we must see," was the unexpectedly evasive answer. "I shall write to you."

A man who had just come in looked at the pair for a moment or two with a curious expression. Then he went up to the duke.

"Ernham," he said, "did you bring your niece here?"

"By Jove, I did, and I've forgotten all about her," the duke answered. "Where is she?"

"Sitting on the sofa there, talking to Emily Royce. You had better take her home."

The duke raised his eyebrows.

"Why?"

"Do you know what Emily Royce's name was when she first came on the stage?"

"No idea," the duke admitted, cheerfully. "Never can remember those things."

"Some one might have reminded you," his friend remarked. "It was Emily Heddon."

The duke was staggered. He looked toward the couch. This was the woman, then, whom his brother had married, and Esther—

"Great heavens!" he muttered. "Esther, I am sorry to interrupt you, but we must go at once," he added, a moment later.

The girl held out her hand to Emily.

"Good-bye," she said, simply. "I hope that I shall see you again."

She felt the touch of her fingers warmly enough returned, but for some reason Emily was silent.

II

THEY were sitting together in the Park—not for the first time. The girl looked very sweet and fresh in her plain muslin gown and large hat, but her clear eyes were a little troubled.

"You are so much older and wiser than I am," she said, "that I suppose you must be right. But I do not like it. I do not think I can come any more."

"But how else can I see you?" he protested. "You know that your aunts dislike the stage and everything connected with it. They would never allow me to visit them."

"It is very perplexing," she admitted. "Aunt Amelia is really very kind to me, but——"

"Perhaps," he whispered, leaning over toward her, "you do not want to see me any more."

She looked at him a little shyly. Her eyes were full of reproach. She was adorably pretty.

"It is not kind of you to say that," she murmured, "because you know that I do."

He touched her fingers for a moment, and she felt a guilty thrill of joy, inexplicable, wonderful. He had had so much experience in these matters, every little move was known to him. He began to talk, and she to listen, the color coming and going in her cheeks, a whole world of new emotions roused, quivering into life by the soft, passionate words which came so readily to his lips. Of course, he triumphed. It was a foregone conclusion, the battle altogether too one-sided. Soon he was walking by her side toward the gates.

A victoria was stopped close to them, and a woman all in white descended. She was paler even than the chiffon which hung from her parasol, but her

eyes seemed lighted with smoldering fire. Levenson swore under his breath. Even Esther felt that there was something inappropriate in the glad little cry of welcome which sprang to her lips.

"How fortunate that I should see you both!" Emily exclaimed. "Miss Campbell, I want you to do me a favor. I want you to jump straight into my carriage, and let my people take you home."

"Alone?" the child exclaimed. "But you are coming, too! May I not drive with you?"

Emily shook her head. She denied herself a great deal.

"The carriage will return for me here," she answered. "I have something particular to say to Mr. Levenson."

Mr. Levenson did not seem at all enchanted at the prospect. His appearance was, to say the least, sulky. Nevertheless, his protest was almost inarticulate, and Emily simply turned her back upon him. She saw the child into the little victoria, and waved her hand in adieu. Then she returned to Levenson. They stood face to face upon the broad path.

"My friend," she said, drily, "I hope you will believe that your flirtations and liaisons, of which I am told you are somewhat proud, are, in a general way, matters of supreme unimportance to me. In this particular case, however, I have something to say. I insist upon it that you discontinue your clandestine meetings and all correspondence with that child."

There were times when Levenson was not handsome, and this was one of them. His manner was shifty, his indignation petulant.

"Really, Mrs. Royce," he said, "I scarcely see that our relations are such as to give you the right to dictate to me in such matters."

She smiled, faintly. She had been the humiliation of his life of amours, and she knew it.

"We will not discuss that," she answered. "I know you through and through, Arthur Levenson, and I am going to appeal to your only vulner-

able spot—your self-interest. You obey my wishes in this matter, or you leave the theatre.”

“You are not serious?” he exclaimed.

“I am very serious indeed. I can do without you—you cannot do without me. Our play is the biggest success London has known for years, and your share in it is not worth a snap of the fingers. Yet you share with me the honors and the profit. So it shall continue unless you disobey my wishes in this matter. If you meet or speak to that child again unchaperoned, you go.”

“This is monstrous!” he exclaimed. “I have a vested right in the play.”

“You might force me to withdraw it,” she answered, “but that would not trouble me in the least. I am a rich woman.”

He turned on his heel with a little exclamation, and walked away. Emily sat down and waited for her carriage.

The immediate effect of Emily's intervention was the following note duly delivered at Levenson's rooms on the next evening:

16, MERSHAM STREET, W.

MY DEAREST,

I have been so unhappy ever since yesterday, and you have not sent me a line. Do write and tell me what it all means. Why should Mrs. Royce mind our being together?—for I feel sure now that she did. You are not angry with me for obeying her? I was not sure what you wished me to do. You said nothing! You did not even come with me to the carriage. She stood between us, and though, when she looked at me, she seemed kind, I felt that she was very angry with you. Why? Do write me, dear, and tell me. You know that nothing could change me. I shall always be your loving,

ESTHER.

P. S.—Aunt Amelia has been so kind today. I felt that I must tell her about you. Would it matter very much, do you think?

Levenson received this note on his return from a supper-party after the theatre. He spent a few minutes in deliberation, and then sat down and answered it.

55, BLENHEIM MANSIONS, W. C.

MY OWN DEAREST CHILD,

You ask me to explain a very difficult thing, but I shall try. I am obliged to

see a great deal of Mrs. Royce, and I have so few other women friends that I fancy she has fallen into the way of considering me her own special property, to be ordered about and made use of just as suits her convenience. I swear to you, dear, that there has never been anything at all between us. I have never given her the least cause to believe that I cared for her, but you know the great fault of all the women on the stage is jealousy, and I fancy that something of that sort was the cause of Mrs. Royce's bad temper on Thursday. Please do not think me a conceited ass, dear, to tell you these things, but you asked me for the truth, and you have it.

How I have missed you! Yesterday, I really believe, was the longest and dreariest day I have ever spent. What a little witch you are, to come and steal your way so easily into my heart!

You must not tell your aunt anything yet. I shall explain all when we meet, but it would spoil everything to be in too much of a hurry. You are going down the river for Sunday, so we cannot meet till Monday. I have a little plan for then, which I hope you will like. I want you to come here, and have tea with me. There! It sounds terrible, doesn't it, but there is really nothing to fear, and it is much the safest way of meeting. I have wired to my sister to come up and stay with me so as to make everything quite right for you, but, of course, in London no one pretends to be quite so conventional as in the country. I would not ask you if it really mattered in the least, but I can assure you that up here it is quite a common thing. Do you realize, sweetheart, that, as yet, I have never really had you quite to myself? Perhaps that is why I am looking forward to Monday more than I have ever looked forward to anything in my life. You will not disappoint me, dear? No; I am sure that you will not. Get here about four o'clock, and I shall be waiting to open the door myself.

Ever your fond lover,

ARTHUR.

He despatched the note, and laughed softly to himself as he lighted a cigarette.

“She will come,” he murmured. “She is such a dear little fool.”

He was right. She came, but it had cost her a great effort, and even his most impressive greeting, and the touch of his arm about her waist, did not wholly reassure her. Her hands were cold, and she was trembling a little.

“Where is your sister, Arthur?” she asked, looking round the room with dark, anxious eyes.

"She will be here directly, dearest," he answered. "Her train is a little late. Come and sit down in my own easy-chair, and tell all about these last few days. Do you know that I have not yet had even one tiny little kiss from you!"

She kept him away from her for a moment. She was looking very grave, and there was even a suspicion of tears in her dark eyes.

"Arthur," she faltered, "of course, it is delightful to be here with you, but I have all the time the feeling that I have done something dreadful. Tell me, dear—please tell me the truth. Is it very horrid of me to come? Listen! Is that your sister, do you think?"

He smiled reassuringly at her, and opened his arms. For the moment, he wished that he had not invented that sister.

"Very likely, dear," he answered. "My man has orders to let no one else in. We are quite safe."

But Leverson had not reckoned with the temptation of gold to a servant whose wages were very much in arrears. The door was thrown open, and Mrs. Royce entered. Behind her was the duke. Leverson felt his rôle of heroic lover slipping away from him. His knees began to shake. He did not like the way the duke closed the door.

Emily went straight up to the child.

"My dear," she said, "you ought not to be here. You must go away."

Esther disengaged herself, not without a certain quiet dignity.

"I know that I have done wrong, Mrs. Royce," she said, "but I really do not see——"

She could not finish her sentence. Emily was humanized. Even the child saw the tenderness quivering in her soft eyes.

"Oh, I know you mean kindly," she cried, "but why do you want to come between Arthur and me? His sister will be here directly."

His sister! Emily held the child's hands tightly. The quickest blow was the kindest.

"He has told you, then, of a sister whom he does not possess; has he told you, I wonder, of a wife whom he does?"

The girl turned deathly pale. Leverson, without means of defense, turned his back upon them.

"A—a wife!"

"Mr. Leverson," Emily continued, "has a wife, singing, I believe, in an East End music-hall, and from whom he cannot procure a divorce owing to their mutual irregularities. He is a coward, and a liar, and a dishonorable person. Ask him any questions you like. I want this parting to be final."

"Will you turn around, please, Arthur?" the girl asked, quietly.

He faced them—self-proclaimed a craven. The girl looked into his face, and she turned very white. Then she turned to Emily. She did not ask him any question at all.

"I have been very foolish," she said, softly. "I did not know—that there were people like this in the world. Will you take me away?"

The duke remained behind. He was a strong man, and Leverson was a coward. Leverson did not play that night, nor for many succeeding ones.

III

A CRITIC in the stall shook open his programme.

"These revivals," he murmured, "should be prohibited. There are no plays written nowadays which can stand the test."

"You chaps always talk like that," grumbled his companion. "What do you come for?"

"Bread and cheese, of course. But come, I will be honest," the critic continued, settling down in his seat. "It is not altogether so with me in this case. If the chief hadn't sent me, I should have paid my own ten-and-six, and come, and if there hadn't been a stall, I should have brought my own camp-stool, and joined the cranks who besiege the pit."

"And if you had overslept yourself?"

"I should have taken my chance at the gallery. Failing that, I should have pawned my watch and secured a box."

"In plain words," his companion remarked, "you meant to come."

"I was bound to come," the critic said, almost gravely. "Wild horses could not have kept me away."

"Of course, you will explain," his friend murmured. "I always looked upon a real professional critic as superior to enthusiasm, curiosity or honesty. Are you going to disillusionize me?"

"Perhaps," the critic answered. "Do you really want to know why I was so keen to come?"

"Of course."

The critic folded up his programme. The orchestra were beginning to tune their violins.

"I will try and tell you, then. Forgive me if I am not very lucid. It is a very hard thing to put it all into words. The play was always a remarkable one. From the first, Emily Royce gave us a wonderful representation of the heroine. But here comes the point of it all. Up to the night of its hundredth celebration, we came to one play; from that to its three-hundredth, we came to an entirely different one. I do not believe that a single word of the play was altered. The cast, except for Leverson, who never counted seriously, remained precisely the same. And yet it was a different play. One woman's supreme genius transformed it all."

"Go on!" his companion begged. "I am interested."

"There is so little more to say," the critic continued. "For some reason or other, on the night of the hundredth performance, Emily Royce chose to transform her whole rendering of the part. That accounts for the extraordinary diversity of opinion you meet with concerning the play. There are women who say that when they came they preferred a dark seat, and would sooner have taken their daughters to

the old Moulin Rouge. There are others of equal discernment and judgment, who protest that it is the purest and most moral play they have ever seen. Both are right. A woman's genius lifted it from the grim fascination of inimitable, but awful, realism to an idyll. Psychologically, I have never met with such an interesting circumstance. I have the idea, somehow, that the change was a momentary inspiration of Emily Royce's. I do not believe that Leverson, for instance, on that hundredth night, knew where he was. He had not the wit to adapt himself, and he floundered horribly. Emily Royce did well to get rid of him. He was always an overrated man. Now, we shall see."

Half-way through the first act, his friend whispered to the critic:

"Which is it going to be?"

"The realism!" the critic answered. "Look at that gesture! Ugh!"

A little party who had arrived late stole into their places, a tall, gray-haired man, followed by a younger one, both deeply bronzed, both obviously soldiers—a beautiful girl with wonderful eyes, and the duke. The critic reached suddenly for his glasses.

"Watch Emily Royce," he whispered. "She is ill."

She certainly swayed for a moment, and seemed to forget her part. The time for her exit had arrived. She cut a wonderful speech and departed, leaving the audience unimpressed. The curtain fell upon the act, and the critic sighed.

"I am sorry I came," he said. "She has lost her power. That speech was the crucial point, and she lost her nerve. What a pity."

Nevertheless, an hour or so later the critic showed that he was human. He, too, with all those others, stood up and shouted till the roof seemed to shake with the thunder of acclaiming voices. He, too, felt his eyes dim, a curious lump in his throat. It was marvelous that a woman could play like this upon the heartstrings of hardened men.

Emily Royce did not answer the shouts which seemed almost to demand

her presence. A great actor, who for once in his life felt himself a nonentity, presented her excuses. Mrs. Royce was only just recovered from a serious illness. She had acted against her physician's advice. She was very deeply grateful to them for their magnificent summons, but she was not able to answer it. So the lights went out, and the people unwillingly departed. The hush of a wonderful enthusiasm seemed to hover still over the house like a live thing, compelling reverence, forbidding the interchange of all after-theatre inanities. The critic strode into the street, and walked straight to his club without saying a word.

Emily Royce sat in her room, trembling in every limb, very white and very miserable.

"It was cruel of her to come!" she murmured. "She must know!"

She did not hear the knock at the door. Swift footsteps crossed the floor,

a pair of arms were thrown around her neck. The child was there on her knees.

"I have never thanked you," the child cried. "I never could. I have brought—somebody else."

A bronzed man held out his hands.

"It was my wretched temper, Emily," he declared. "You saved our child—God bless you! Won't you take pity on me?"

The duke stole out, and drew the young man after him.

"Here, Morton," he said, "Esther can spare you for a moment. Cut round to the Savoy, private room for five. Tell Joseph I give him *carte blanche*. I'll bring the family party along presently. Tell him I'll break his head if it isn't the best supper he's ever served."

The duke listened anxiously at the door for a moment. Then he drew a sigh of relief, and lighted a cigarette.

"It'll be all right," he declared, softly.

